First appearance of Voltaire

To rest his weary mind, that night in his cell he began to read a book that recounted in detail the death of Voltaire, a foolish and unfortunate figure who, in his terrible ordeal, was more interested in the fate of his old, already semi-rotten skeleton than in that of his immortal soul.

He read the tricks he used to ensure that his body would not be denied ecclesiastical burial, which he desired only out of the most inexplicable and contradictory vanity. To achieve this goal, he called his confessor and agreed to sign a document retracting his doctrines.

But, as he recovered from that illness and regained his health, he regretted his retraction, and fearing a relapse if he became ill again, he filed a protest in the presence of a notary against a similar statement that another confessor might extract from him *in articulo mortis*.

No less than thirty-five years passed; God waited for him with infinite patience.

He found himself once again on the brink of death, and, always concerned about the fate of his body, accepted the help of M. de Tersac, the curate of Saint-Sulpice, his parish, and issued a ritual retraction, without which no priest had the authority to absolve him.

But the curate submitted the case to the archbishop, who did not accept this cunningly worded document and demanded something more categorical.

Voltaire, Taking advantage of a fleeting improvement, he began to tergiversate.

Suddenly, death truly arrived, and the philosopher expired, not surrounded by flowers and friends, and conversing and smiling philosophically, as his admirers imagined, but blaspheming; naked, because his swollen belly could not tolerate even a strand of thread, and crying out for a pool of ice to quench his thirst.

Such was his torture and despair that he plunged his hands into the pus in his bladder and filled his mouth, while those present, his niece Denis, his nephew Villette, his servant Wagnières, his doctors Tronchin and Lorry, transfixed with horror, watched the scene.

Talis vita, finis ita, said the friar, going to close the book. He stopped when he saw a date: Voltaire had died on May 30, 1778, and that night was the bicentenary.

"Two hundred years!" exclaimed the superior. An endless succession of sufferings. And yet their eternity has not even begun. What mysteries, Lord, are those of these souls to whom you gave more light than to others and who have blasphemed you more? What hidden delight is there in pride, which intoxicated and ruined a third of the angels?

With these thoughts, he began to pray until sleep overcame him and he fell asleep.

He must have slept for barely two hours; a loud noise made him open his eyes, and he saw through the window that the moon had not yet risen. Complete darkness in the garden, and in his cell a strange glow and an unbearable stench.

He sat up in his cot and stretched out his hand toward his holy water font. He was paralyzed by an infinitely painful voice coming from the farthest corner.

— "Beware of touching that water, for you would make me flee. Beware of pronouncing exorcisms, if you want me to communicate to you the secrets of the future. I am the unfortunate philosopher whose death you saw written; a wise man in the eyes of fools, and today an eternal fool in my own eyes... Do you want to hear me?"

Brother Plácido managed to see the figure of a naked man, with his Charred and consumed flesh; evidently, the figure of Voltaire.

—Speak in the name of Christ!

No sooner had he uttered this word than he heard the crunching of those bones, saw them bend down to kneel on the flagstones, and heard a lament:

—Why did you call him? Don't you know that when that name is mentioned, all the inhabitants of heaven and hell kneel? You can't even imagine the torment it is for me, who only calls him Infamous, to worship him every time others use his true name.

—Speak; I will not name him again! said the friar, afraid of frightening away that shadow from which he longed to wrest its secrets.

And noticing the grimace of the toothless skull, he asked, perplexed:

—Are you laughing, Voltaire?
—This laughter is my damnation. I have made men laugh so that they would disbelieve in the divinity of the Infamous One. And I believed! I believed and trembled, knowing that one day we would meet face to face. I felt endowed with a prodigious intelligence, greater than that of all men after Solomon, and I could choose between serving God or using it to rise up against Him and be His enemy forever.
— And you said, like Lucifer: *Non serviam*!
— Yes! And He gave me, in return, a very long life, so that I would have time to repent.
— And now you regret not having taken advantage of it?
— No! To repent is to humiliate oneself, an impossible thing in the miserable condition of my soul. If I were to live again, I would be damned again...
— Explain to me this horrible mystery!
— For sixty years I was celebrated and applauded like a king. Poets, philosophers, princes, women, were astonished with admiration at the most trivial of my mockery.
—And you, did you also admire yourself?
—As I grew older, I grew more disgusted with the object of that admiration of men and women, for every time I opened my mouth, before they heard the murmur of my words, I smelled the stench of my breath. But if the stench of my mouth was nauseating, it was incomparably worse the stench of my thoughts.
—Unhappy man!
—They considered me a demigod, and I despised them, feeling my flesh, the wrapping of my immortal soul, rotting. Woe is me! For 84 years, that flesh, which was gradually dissolving, was my only defense against the Infamous One. As long as I, that is, my will, remained entrenched in that flesh, I could continue to shout my war cry: Crush the Infamous One!
—Christ lives, Christ reigns, Christ rules! the old man exclaimed, horrified, without thinking of the consequences of this triple praise.
—Alas! said Voltaire with indescribable lamentation; and again the sinister cracking of his burned knees was heard, which bent to the ground; and the macabre figure was seen prostrate itself on its knees. This is my greatest torment: to confess his divinity!
— *In nomine Jesu*, the friar muttered to himself, *omne genu flectatur coelestium, terrestrium et infernorum.*

And he added aloud:

— Did you not fear God?
— Oh, yes, I did! Oh, misery and contradiction of my pride! When I thought of death, I was terrified, and I would have given my fortune, my fame, and my books for a single grain of humility, the seed of repentance.
But humility is not natural; it is supernatural. A man without eyes could see more easily than a proud man could say: Forgive me, Lord. Seeing without eyes is unnatural, a natural force Natural force can be modified by another natural force.
But to repent without humility is against the supernatural, infinitely beyond the powers of man.
Divine grace is needed.
—And, by chance, did God not give it to you?
—Yes, in torrents! Would to heaven that I had not been given so many graces. For, when judging us in this gloomy region, rejected graces are taken more into account than sins committed.
—Go on, Voltaire! I listen to you anxiously.
The Patriarch of Ferney continued thus, amid dry and horrifying sobs:
—When one has obstinately rejected for twenty years, thirty years, half a century, the supernatural aids of grace, God He abandons his simple natural powers, intelligence and will.
I saw my fate if I did not humble myself; but humbling myself would have been a miracle. And my pride intoxicated me, telling myself that I, stinking and wormy, could, by my own free will, resist grace, indulge in my strength, and fight against God.
What madness, to do what was impossible even for the stars of heaven and the archangels: resist God!
I had the frenzy of blasphemy and sacrilege. To mock the Infamous One, I sacrilegiously took communion many times before my servants; and my friends applauded and imitated me.
And so I arrived at the day of terror.
—"The hour of vengeance," said the friar, horrified. "*Effunde frameam*." "Draw your sword, Lord."
—"So it was; God's turn came, and he drew his sword upon me."
— Tell me about your last moments.
— Men don't suspect the mysteries of that hour, especially of the final moment when the powers of the soul, memory, understanding, will, acquire immeasurable acuity.
— How long does that last?

— Suppose it's only a second; but in that second there's much more than your entire life, however long it may be; there's your eternity. In that instant, your will can determine its course.
Woe is me! The obstinacy of eighty years, transformed into final impenitence, is like a wall of incandescent bronze that surrounds the soul and withstands the final assault of mercy, trembling, oh, contradiction!, at being defeated, and dreading in advance what its own triumph will be.
Alas! I was triumphing. The rays of grace broke upon my heart like ivory arrows against a rock.
—Does grace ever triumph?
—Thousands of times, because it is the virtue of the Blood. How many unexpected retractions remain in the secret of the afterlife! But if you could see the hardness of those who sinned against the Spirit... of the desperate, of the ironic ones who, in order to get a joke, hurled a blasphemy, of those who sold their last hour to pride, of the apostates. To assist and watch over their final impenitence, the devil abandons all other occupations. And he enters their veins, and there is a kind of transfusion of diabolical pride into the soul of the renegade.
—"Men do not know the depths of Satan," murmured Friar Placido.
—"If the devil could repent, that would be the moment of his conversion, when, by strengthening the pride of a soul, he has impoverished his own by transfusing it into it. Alas! When one reaches such depths, the soul voluntarily sinks into its destiny."
—"Voluntarily?" the friar asked.
—"Does it surprise you? Listen: I have signed my eternal damnation with my own hand. And I would sign it again a hundred times, with full discernment, before humbling myself and saying, 'I have sinned, Lord; forgive me!'"
—"I cannot believe," replied Friar Placido, terrified, that it is true that if you were to live again, you would deserve your damnation."
—"Yes, a hundred and a thousand times!" In the last moment of my life, when, in order to quench my thirst, I filled my mouth with filthy matter and uttered that frightful shriek that has gone down in my history; when my eyes clotted, everyone thought I was dead. But I was alive, scratching the rotten mud of my flesh that still, for a few seconds, kept me from falling into the hands of God.
— Could you still repent?
— Yes, and the Infamous One appeared to me with his crown of thorns and the wounds, open hands and feet; bloody chest and an unsigned paper, that was my sentence.

" I, who redeemed you with my blood, said to me, I will not sign it; but I give it to you so that your freedom may be determined."
For a second, when I saw my past and my future, I weighed the consequences.
I no longer even had to ask for forgiveness. The Infamous One was going ahead and offering it to me; all I had to do was accept it, confessing that I had sinned. The world would ignore my retraction until Judgment Day, and I would be saved.
Impossible! For sixty years I had fought against the Infamous One. If I accepted his forgiveness now, victory would be his. If I rejected him, I, a worm of the earth who had only half a minute to live, would rise up to him and shake the heavens with my eternal blasphemies.
But such was the horror of my fate that I hesitated.
Who would have given me a grain of humility at that moment!
—"Would you not have rejected him?" Voltaire remained silent and then answered, in a cavernous voice.
—Yes, I would have refused! Then I took the sentence that He did not want to sign, and I was my own judge and signed it with this hand that wrote La Pucelle and that now melts bronze... Look!

Voltaire stretched out that hand that had written so many filthy blasphemies with extreme sharpness and touched a bronze candlestick in a cupboard on the wall.

The hard utensil melted as a candle placed at the mouth of a furnace would melt. Drops of metal fell on the tiles and were crushed there.
—You know, then, Voltaire continued, that no condemnation bears the signature of the Lamb. They all bear ours!

A bell rang. Voltaire shuddered.
—Bells terrify me. Everything that measures time terrifies me. One year. Ten years. Two hundred years. When will time end and naked eternity begin?
—"When?" the superior asked. "Are we not already seeing the final stages of the Apocalypse? Hasn't the sixth seal of the book of the seven seals already been broken?"

The moon shone among the cypresses in the orchard. Voltaire looked toward the crosses planted in the ground at the heads of the dead in the Lord, and turned his eyes in anguish.
—"One day not far off, the lapacho tree will bloom at the end of the orchard; and the dead will rise to meet their Lord; you, who will not die until his coming, will ascend with them, the resurrected, into the air, to accompany him who will come to judge the living and the dead."

But before that... he stopped.

The friar feared that he would remain silent at the moment of revelation, and urged him with these words:

—"The Antichrist will have come before then..."

—"Yes," exclaimed Voltaire with diabolical enthusiasm. That will be the time when the Infamous One will be defeated in Catholicism and its saints...

You friars believe Catholicism is invincible. No! It knows it will be defeated!"

—"I already know," replied Friar Placido, "that it will be defeated, but only for a time. The Apocalypse announces that the Beast from the Sea, that is, the Antichrist, will dominate all peoples, languages, and nations, and will wage war against the saints and defeat them, which he will be allowed to do for forty-two months.

But will that still take long?

Who is wrong: those who believe that thousands and thousands of years are still to come before the coming of the Antichrist, or those who believe that we are already approaching his kingdom?

—"What do you believe?"

—"I believe," replied Friar Placido, "that the Antichrist will come soon, and that this coming will occur before the period of religious peace during which the devil will be imprisoned and bound with a great chain and locked in the abyss."

—"Don't you know that this is not the opinion of most of your interpreters?"

—"Yes, I know," said the friar. Most modern interpreters maintain that the end of the world is still thousands of centuries away, and that the Antichrist will come on the eve of the great and horrible day of the Lord, when Satan will be released from his prison and unleashed for a little while."

But I think the opposite: that even if the world may physically last millions of years, humanity is already close to meeting the greatest enemy of...

— Don't name him! I understand you now.

— And that this enemy, whom we call the Antichrist, will be a person; a man of perdition, as Saint Paul says, and not a society or a sect, as some maintain.

— You think right: he will be a man, but he will not be alone; he will be incarnated in a religious order whose superior will be its false prophet.

— What order?

— In ten years, you will guess it without me telling you.

— And I believe, the friar continued, that the Jews will receive him as the Messiah, and therefore that his coming will be before the conversion of the Jews, in the midst of a great persecution of all nations against the people of Israel. So the true sign of the approach of the Antichrist will not be the universal persecution of Christians, but the persecution of the Jews.
—That's the truth! said Voltaire.
—And I also think that this will happen soon, and that only after the death of the Antichrist will the Jews be converted and Jerusalem will be restored, with a king of the lineage of David."
—So it will be! confirmed Voltaire.
—So is the Antichrist about to be born?
—He has already been born.
—Where? Of what race? Brother Placido asked anxiously; but distrust troubled him. How can I believe you, if you are a son of lies?
—The Lord commands me to tell the truth: the Antichrist, who was born in 1966, is of the tribe of Dan; and he will be proclaimed king not only by the Jews, but also by the Muslims.
—Will his empire be great?
—Yes: the number of his horsemen will be two hundred million, according to the reckoning of the Apocalypse.
—And what will his capital be?
—The city of his birth, the greatest, most glorious, and holiest city in the world.
—Jerusalem, then?
—No: Rome.
—Rome, birthplace and capital of the Antichrist? the friar exclaimed, stupefied.
— Why, then, do the interpreters say he will be born in Babylon?
— "Rome is Babylon. Reread the end of the First Epistle of Peter the Apostle and you will find the explanation. Everything is in the Scriptures. Everything is prophesied."
—Yes, said the friar. The Prophet Amos has said: "The Lord will do nothing that He has not revealed to His servants the prophets". But interpreters dispute about the meaning of the prophecies. Hundreds of years have passed, arguing about what the seven diademed heads of the Beast from the Sea symbolize... Explain that to me!
— It's in the Apocalypse, and you know it. They are seven kings, who have been so, materially or morally, because of the influence they exerted among men. Five of them have already passed away: Nero, Muhammad, Luther; the fourth was me, and the fifth was Lenin.
— And those who have not yet passed away?

— The sixth is already here: the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire...
— But neither that empire nor that emperor exists. There is a Roman Empire ruled by Charles Albert, and there is a German Empire ruled by Adolf Henry.
—In less than ten years, they will be only one, Voltaire replied.
Berlin and Rome will be cities of a single empire, under the scepter of the successor of Adolph Henry, who will prepare for the advent of the seventh king, who will be king of Rome, the eleventh horn of the Dragon...
—The Antichrist!
—I will visit you again in ten years, and in twenty.
—And will I still be alive? Consider that I was born on the first day of this century.
—You, who now live under the Angelic Shepherd, will see the last popes pass like waves in a river, Gregory XVII, Paul VI, Clement XV. You will attend the conclave that will elect Leo XIV, a Jew, son of Jerusalem, converted to the Infamous One, and under whose reign the Jews will be converted, and you will see the lapacho tree flourish and the last pope, Peter Romanus.
—Friar Placido listened and trembled. —Will I be a cardinal, perhaps?
—You won't need to be. The sixth head will reign in Rome, who will kill a pope; and you will have met the Beast of the Earth, the false prophet of the Antichrist, and the time will come of the seventh head, who will be a woman, and of the eleventh horn, the king of the Romans, the Antichrist himself.
—And will the Gregorian order exist then?
—In ten years, I'll answer you. It's enough for you to know that from the order a brilliant star will emerge, whose name is in the Apocalypse.
—Could you discover it?
—Wormwood! Fray Placido murmured with a whisper of his voice.
—I thought you wouldn't be able to name it!
—Why did the superior of the Gregorians use that name, which means in the Apocalypse a fallen star? Who did he have in mind? No one! God was his witness that he thought of no one!
To assuage his anxiety, he began to repeat the text of Revelation:
—"And the third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, burning like an axe; and it fell into a third of the rivers and into the spring of waters. And the name of the star is

Wormwood, and a third of the waters turned into wormwood, and many men who drank them died, because they became bitter".

That symbol had been interpreted as an allusion to the apostate friar Luther, whose doctrines poisoned so many millions of people.

—Could it be applied 500 years later to another figure?

He wanted to ask for clarification, but Voltaire had disappeared. The cell door was closed. Streams of moonlight streamed in through the half-opened windows.

Friar Plácido opened the door and window wide, because the stench in the room was unbearable.

—What a strange dream! he said to himself, taking a hyssop and sprinkling holy water on the floor and walls.

It was a night of a full moon. Everything was wrapped in a silver veil. There was no reason to turn on the light.

He leaned on the windowsill and breathed deeply in the subtle, pure air. He counted two, three, five crosses among the bushes; he saw the shriveled branches of the lapacho tree, felt sleepy, and retreated.

But as he walked to the platform, his foot stumbled on an obstacle. He bent down; it was a lump of molten bronze.

—"The candlestick!" he exclaimed in terror.

He crossed himself, lay down again, and fell asleep immediately.

Already in the distant countryside, the roosters were crowing, anticipating the dawn.